

February 20, 2023

Testimony of Lee Greenhouse, Salisbury, CT, in Support of H.J. No. 1

For the Government, Administration, and Elections Committee

Moving to “No Excuse” Absentee Voting in Connecticut

I am providing this testimony in my personal capacity, but as someone deeply steeped in the issues surrounding mailed-out ballot voting. I serve as a volunteer at the National Vote at Home Institute (NVAHI), a non-profit non-partisan organization focused on improving the voting experience for voters across the country and implementing convenient voting options to include effective ballot delivery systems (commonly known as ballots by mail) along with in-person voting options.

One of my activities in this capacity has been to adapt and generalize for national use the report produced by NVAHI in 2019 in response to former Connecticut Governor Malloy’s Executive Order 64 covering the issues the state should consider in moving towards better access to mailed-out ballots. [A link to that original EO 64 report is here.](#)

The rationale for supporting H.J. No. 1

H.J. No. 1 has my full support, and I recommend it receive yours for the following reasons:

1. It brings Connecticut into the mainstream of voting rights
2. It is good for voters
3. It is good for elections officials and administrators
4. It is good for democracy

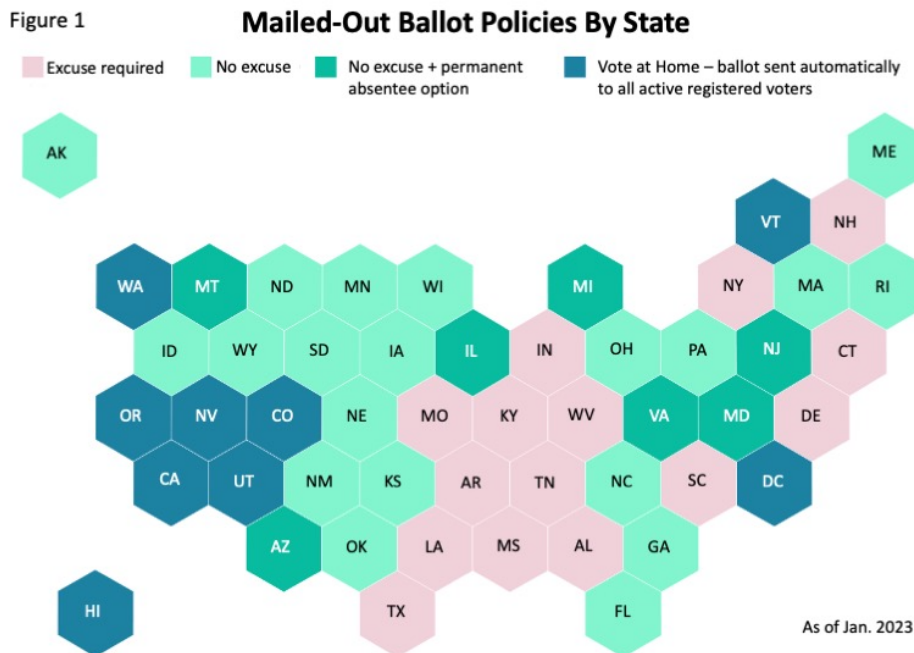
Bringing Connecticut into the mainstream of voting rights nationally

Today in Connecticut, voters must provide an excuse to have their ballot delivered to them and vote “absentee.” This places the state squarely in the back of the pack of current policy nationally, as only 15 states still require an excuse to vote by

mailed-out ballot. A full 35 states plus the District of Columbia recognize it is the voter's ballot, not the state's ballot, and so provide that ballot by mail to the voter without the obstacle of requiring an excuse. And those states have proven in election after election over many years that systems can be in place to assure their elections are safe and secure.

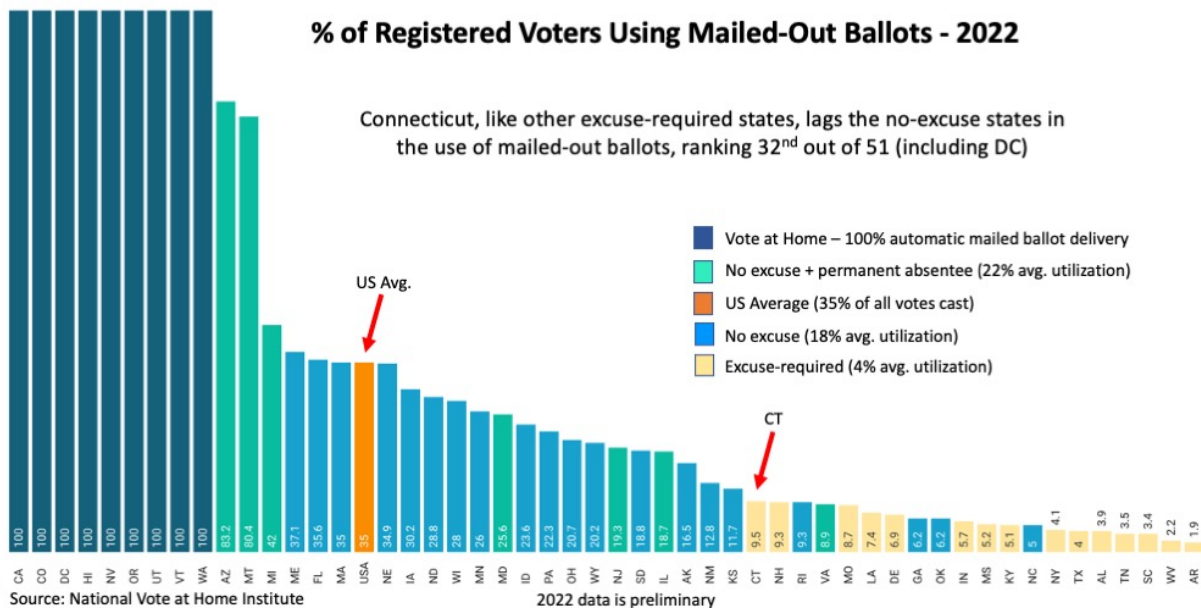
No-excuse mail voting strengthens a method of voting that has grown popular with voters across the country. Just in the last 20 years, the NVAHI calculates that more than 1 billion ballots have been mailed out, across all 50 states and DC, for presidential and midterm elections, party primary races, special vacancy elections, and local elections. Strict and ever-improving security and verification protocols have meant that cases of even alleged voter fraud involving these 1 billion+ ballots – much less actual, proven cases – have amounted to far less than .0001% of the total. And none of those cases, across all 50 states, have come even close to changing an election outcome.

You can see in Figure 1 below how mailed-ballot policy looks across the nation. Most of the states still adhering to the antiquated “excuse required” model that Connecticut uses are located in the South. At the other end of the spectrum are eight states plus the District of Columbia that use a 100% vote-at-home (VAH) model in which all active registered voters automatically receive a mailed-out ballot in every election.



Connecticut sits in the bottom third of all states with regard to use of mailed-out ballots. Only 9.5% of Connecticut voters use mailed-out ballots compared to the national average, which is nearly 4x higher at 35%. This low rate of mailed-ballot voting is highly correlated with excuse-required policies, as shown in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2

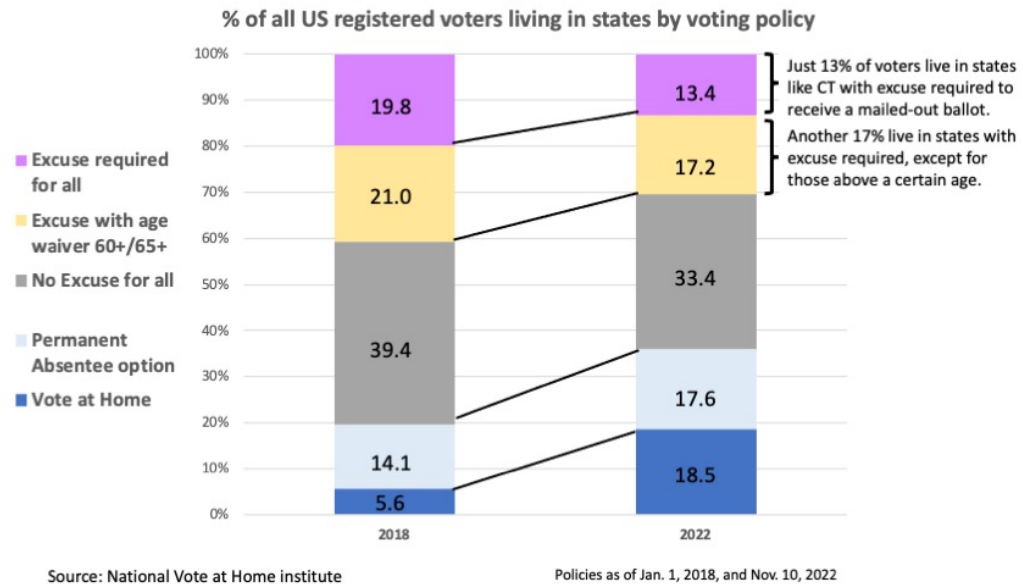


A study by the NVAHI, which tracks mailed-ballot voting nationally and on a state-by-state basis, has placed the Connecticut dead last using a 15-criteria scoring system based on how “mailed-out ballot friendly” each state’s policies are. The full matrix and scoring methodology can be found [here](#).

Meanwhile, there has been a decided trend nationally to improve access to mailed-out ballots, as can be seen in the graphic below. Today, only about 13% of US voters live in a state such as Connecticut that requires all voters to provide an excuse to have their ballots mailed to them. Another 17% of voters live in states that allow only voters of a certain age (typically 60 or 65) to request a mailed without an excuse. These numbers continue to shrink in favor of no-excuse policies. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3

Five Years of Significant Progress for Mailed-Out Ballots



Nationally in the 2022 general election, approximately 39 million ballots were cast from the 61 million mailed out ballots. Those represented approximately 35% of all ballots cast and a 40% increase from the 25% of mailed-out ballots cast in the 2018 general election.

Furthermore, 36% of all US voters now have the opportunity to opt-in to a “permanent absentee” list whereby they will automatically receive a mailed-out ballot for every election until they opt out or move out of state.

No-excuse mailed-out ballots are not just a national trend, but also clearly happening among New England states:

- Vermont in 2021 went to 100% mailed-out ballots for its general elections.
- Massachusetts in 2022 was the latest to shift to a no-excuse model via its VOTES Act.
- Rhode Island in 2022 solidified its no-excuse position along with adding a number of other positive mailed-out ballot policies with its “Let RI Vote” Act.
- Maine in 2021 added a “single sign-up” option for voters 65+ to always have their ballot delivered by mail.

- Even New Hampshire passed a no-excuse law in 2019, only to face a veto from Governor Sununu.

Good for Voters

Voters choose mailed-out ballots for a host of reasons: work schedules, family obligations, transportation challenges, physical disabilities, bad weather, and long voting lines, among others. These and other realities can often end up thwarting citizens' in-person voting plans. The benefit of no-excuse ballots is that voters can enjoy the convenience and flexibility of receiving a ballot in the mail without having to know (or pretend to know) what their personal circumstances will be on Election Day in the future. They do not have to worry that somehow if their circumstances change between when they apply for a mailed-out ballot and Election Day, they can be called out for "making a false statement." They can rest assured that whatever happens, they will have a ballot in their hands and be able to cast their vote.

Adding a "permanent absentee" option further improves the voter experience by relieving voters of the burden of having to be aware of – and act on – the key dates and procedures for making ballot requests of their town/city clerks in time for upcoming elections.

Good for Elections Officials

Today in Connecticut, town and city clerks and their staffs must process absentee ballot requests containing excuses. In theory, those officials should be examining the reason cited by each voter and verifying their legitimacy. Otherwise, what is the point of the exercise?

Practically, this rarely if ever happens in Connecticut or most other states still living with "excuse required" policies. So, clerks in Connecticut's cities and towns are being asked to handle an administrative duty that they cannot practically perform. The passage of H.J. No. 1 would free the clerks to focus on areas where their expertise and attention were warranted to better improve the voting experience.

Of course, some elections officials and administrators may worry that they could face a material increase in mailed-out ballot applications, causing more work for the clerks and registrars. However, the data shows that states with no-excuse policies see, on average, only about 2x growth in the utilization of mailed-out

ballots. Applying that data to Connecticut, suggests that its 9.5% utilization from the 2022 midterms would rise to 19% over time. Data further shows that states that move up from excuse-required to no-excuse policies do not see a step function in use immediately, but grow only gradually over time.

Furthermore, whatever increase in work needed to handle added demand for mailed-out ballots would likely be offset by shorter lines, higher voter satisfaction, and reduced stress on election workers at in-person polling locations.

One final thought about assuring clerks that the move to a no-excuse policy will not be a burden to them. Should H.J. No. 1 pass and then be approved by the voters, the legislature would be tasked with the actual implementation legislation. As part of that, the legislature could consider a “single sign-up – SSU” or “permanent absentee” policy whereby a voter would have the option to always have their ballots mailed to them unless they changed their mind or moved out of state.

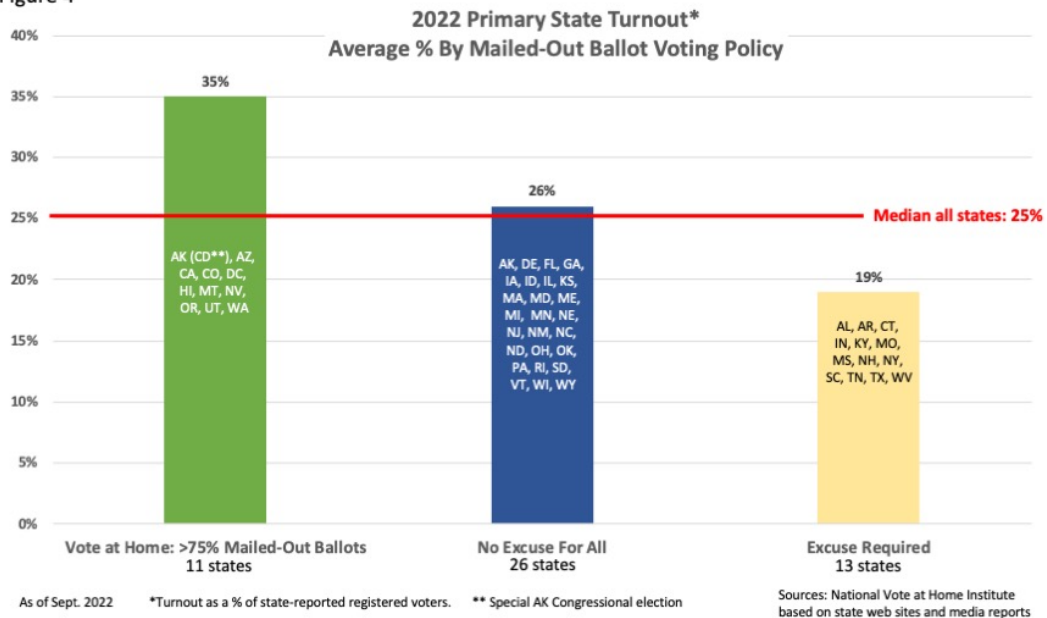
The “permanent absentee” option is very popular with voters. Research has shown that 50% or more of absentee voters are “repeaters” who request a mailed-out ballot election after election, year after year. For the clerks, it is much more efficient to simply allow voters to join a list where they get their ballot without asking every time. The maintenance of the list can be streamlined using a set of tools and procedures that have been adopted and used for decades by other states. Thus, with a permanent absentee policy in place, the clerks could see their administrative load cut substantially, since they would no longer have to field redundant absentee requests from voters already on the permanent list. [Here is a link to the research on this topic.](#)

Good for democracy

Anything that reduces friction in the process of elections tends to increase voter engagement, turnout, and satisfaction. Eliminating voters’ obligation to understand the no-excuse requirements and then come up with an appropriate excuse clearly reduces friction.

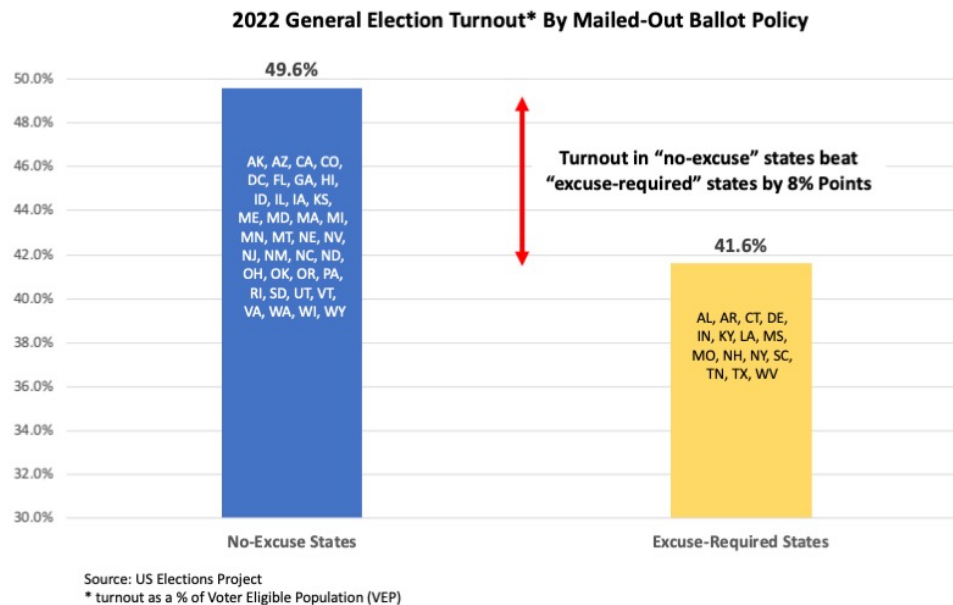
The positive impact of a no-excuse policy can be easily seen in turnout data. As documented in Figure 4 below from the 2022 primaries, states with a no-excuse policy on average saw turnout that was seven percentage points higher than those that required an excuse.

Figure 4



The same phenomenon held true in the 2022 general election. The average turnout among the 35 no-excuse states plus the District of Columbia was eight percentage points higher than for the excuse-required states.

Figure 5



Summary

Putting in place a no-excuse absentee policy for voters would align Connecticut with the national trend towards a majority of ballots being cast in modes other than just in a voting booth on Election Day, and it would dovetail nicely with Connecticut voters' recent approval of the constitutional amendment to allow early in-person voting.

Connecticut would join the majority of states that have already adopted a no-excuse policy and improved the effectiveness of their mailed-out voting programs.

Putting voters' choice first, as H.J. No. 1 will do, is both the right thing and the timely thing to do to improve voters' experience and engagement in our democratic system.